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A LIBRARIAN'S JOB IN BASE SECTION NO. 1, FRANCE*

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The work of the A. L. A. representative in Base Section No. 1, France, is so unlike that of a camp library in the States or work in a public library that it must be seen to be fully appreciated. The same books satisfying the same human needs are used, but the conditions surrounding the work—conditions that are essentially a part of it—the daily rains, the mud, strange customs, a foreign language, and homesick men, make it altogether different.

Let me try to give you some idea of the area of the base: It includes five departments of France: Loire-Inferieure, Morbihan, Maine et Loire, Vendee, and Deux-Sèvres—much of it a part of ancient Brittany. This territory (with New York City as St. Nazaire) would include approximately the cities of Providence, Worcester, Springfield, Albany, Scranton, Reading, Lancaster, Wilmington, and all that intervenes.

On January 5, when I came to St. Nazaire, there were in operation in the base fifty Army and Navy Camps in twenty-five different places or centers. The camps themselves are largely special camps, incident to the fact that St. Nazaire is the great supply base for the A. E. F., composed of men engaged in a more or less special line of work, and all a part of the S. O. S. The combined American Army and Navy population of the camps, etc., in this base since I have been here has at no time been less than 100,000 and sometimes has been nearer 200,000. A feature of this base is the large number of colored men in it—at one time about 30,000. At the present time six large Y. M. C. A. huts are exclusively for colored men, or nearly so, five of them in charge of colored workers. There are also many small huts for colored men.

The work of the A. L. A. representative in Base Section No. 1 is of five different

classes: First, that of getting books off the docks when they are unloaded from the ships, and moved to the A. L. A. warehouse in Paris; second, supplying books and getting book service to all the camps and men in the base; third, work through the school officers for the service of the instructors and students in the post, area, and divisional schools; fourth, getting book service to the men on the ships that do not get back to the U. S. for long periods of time—freighters, submarine chasers, etc.; fifth, salvaging books from military outfits about to return to the States, from camps greatly reduced in size or closed altogether, and from the salvage officer who gets books along with other salvaged material from every conceivable place.

Getting books off the docks and shipped to Paris was the first thing I was introduced to when I landed in St. Nazaire, for the books for the Army education work began to come in at once. At St. Nazaire the United States had eighteen docks in the basin (some have now been returned to the French). Only four of the eighteen docks have covered warehouses or sheds on them. Most of the time books were unloaded at these four docks, but when they were unloaded at any of the others, as occasionally happened, they were exposed to the weather, except for such shelter as they could get from tarpaulin, until they were loaded into box cars.

On the docks when books were being loaded on cars I usually tried to be present to see that all educational books were sure to be put on, if the car would not take the whole lot; that all broken boxes were coopered, nailed up properly, etc.; in short, that the books went forward as promptly and in as good condition as possible. This meant sometimes being at the docks a good part of the night—on one occasion all night, until the night gang went home from work at 4 a. m. The dock of-

*Abstract of paper.

ficers and men generally have uniformly been most obliging and helpful in all this work.

The work of these dock men was of fundamental importance in the winning of the war. It was carried on under most trying conditions. Many of these men for months never knew what it was to have dry feet with their shoes on. They knew no holidays or Sundays, and until a few weeks ago two shifts worked twenty-four hours a day with only enough time off for meals. Sometimes a single gang—either the day shift or the night shift—would put a thousand tons of freight on cars or trucks at one dock as their day's work.

The people in the United States do not yet understand the splendid service performed by these men, and especially the hard physical work of the colored stevedores, many of whom are college trained men. The percentage of illiterates among them as a whole, however, is high.

Looking after the libraries in the camps has always been secondary to the work of getting books shipped out for the rest of France. But nevertheless the camp work has always been very important. At the present time (May 1), A. L. A. books are being circulated from no less than 200 places in this Base Section. Since January 1 about 100 places have been closed and the books salvaged, so that the total number of places from which books have been issued since I came here is 300. Of these sixty-five are in and around St. Nazaire, including Montoir—in Camp 1, St. Nazaire, there being fifteen places. And new places are still opening—a large Salvation Army hut and a large colored hut at Montoir being scheduled to open soon after May 1, besides smaller places, all to be supplied with books. It is impossible of course for one person along with all the other work to care for all these places as I would like to do it.

My first problem on this phase of my work was to place books where there were none or very few, and the next to get such help locally (that is, from the camps or from the hut personnel), that the books

would give the maximum of service with the minimum of loss or wastage of books. In this work I have had the best possible coöperation from the Army and from the chief officials of the other welfare organizations, though not always from the personnel directly on the job. Considering that nearly all these people were untrained, I feel on the whole that one should be surprised at the results accomplished rather than dwell on the shortcomings of the service.

First of all there has been a book hunger the like of which I did not believe possible before coming to France. Every one who has been in contact with our boys has realized this and felt it most keenly, with the result that to nearly all of us our work has seemed more like feeding starving men than like that of librarians. When I came to the casual officers' camp at Angers in January there were no books on the shelves and men were standing in line for hours at the librarian's desk waiting for someone to return a book, so that they might have the first or an early chance to get it. The time allowed the men for leave from the camp was limited to four hours per week, the usual leave allowed in the base. Shortly before I came there had been a period when the camp was closed entirely, no men getting out on passes, except in line of their duty, and that took very few. These were men of active minds, which simply *had* to be employed to prevent their being lost. The problem here was not a library problem at all—it was an intense human problem—to get something for these men to read—if for no other purpose than to save their minds. After I saw that problem they had books within twenty-four hours, and in a few days more, books in abundance ever afterwards until the casuals were gone.

In the face of situations like this (and I have seen such scores of times) I believe the American Library Association and the American people who provided the means for us to do this work are not going to concern themselves greatly with the ques-

tion of how many books were lost in France or how many or how big libraries we established or what fine library buildings we built, but rather with the question: When the boys were hungry for books to read did they get them? Let's forget about the loss and the wear and tear of books. Under climatic and military conditions these are bound to be great. These losses are a part of the price that had to be paid for the service.

My general plan—as likely as not it could not be followed—was first to visit a library hut or a library to get some idea of the situation, then to deliver the books, with printed and oral directions as to their use, and finally wherever possible to visit the library and the librarian for a longer period a few days or a week after the books were delivered. If I had the books I never had any trouble to get transportation for their delivery. The welfare organizations and the Army always furnished it whenever I asked for it. And sometimes this involved a man and an automobile truck for three days on one trip, with a drive of nearly 300 miles.

In one of the colored huts at Montoir I saw one day a most interesting class of twenty-five colored men taking a French lesson. Some of these men since coming to France have not only learned to read and speak the language with ease and fluency, but to write letters in it. The colored men so far as I am able to judge read poetry and books of a literary character to a much larger extent than the white men. The latter read much less poetry than they did in the camp libraries in the States. Outside of fiction—and western fiction especially—they are most interested in books on business and trades—vocational books—the things they expect to do when they are back in civil life. For the call of the job is heard very loudly in France to-day. Referring again to the colored men, I am sure that no class or group of readers appreciate the work of the A. L. A. more than they do. The Y. M. C. A. has been especially fortunate in the high type of colored men and

women it has secured for librarians in its colored huts.

The library work in hospitals will doubtless be presented in a separate paper, but I can not refrain from referring to my first visit to Savenay Hospital center—about 15 miles from St. Nazaire. There are eight Red Cross recreation huts in this center, every one of which was supposed to have books. On the shelves of some of these where I found from 100 to 150 men in the hut there was not a single book, another hut had four books, and the largest hut, with seats in the library for nearly a hundred readers had less than fifty books.

Nothing I have done in the placing of books has made so deep an impression on me or gave me more personal satisfaction than when I first took books to the boys in Venereal Stockade. The number of boys in that barbed wire and guarded enclosure equaled the total attendance at an annual meeting of the A. L. A., except a few of the largest conferences. The authorities told me that any books placed there we could never get again, for from time to time they would be burned for fear of spreading disease. So I collected books more or less worn from some of the larger camp libraries and took them out. My arrival with the books was greeted with a shout—a despairing, tragic shout—that still rings in my ears. It was this: "Fellows, something to read." They had had nothing. Any time, work or money you may have put into this A. L. A. work you would regard as more than amply justified if you could hear as I heard them that afternoon, only the words: "Fellows, something to read."

The army educational program has occupied a large place in the minds of all interested in educational work overseas. Up to this time the books supplied by the A. L. A. have been the backbone of the work in this base. There are divisional, area and post schools. Most of the work in the latter is elementary and is destined especially for illiterates; in these days the man who can't read and write

makes a poor soldier. There is advanced work in some of the post schools, but it holds a secondary place in them. In this base all these schools are under the direction of the Base Section School Officer. This officer arranged for the men going to French and British universities and those going to the Army University at Beaune. With these two groups of students my work does not connect. With the schools in the base however, it is quite different. There are fourteen active school centers in the base, together with the divisional school in St. Nazaire. The latter started with eighty instructors and 500 students, but has less now because of men returning home. Up to May 10, all the books used by both instructors and students in this school and for the advanced work in the post schools were supplied by the A. L. A. It was only on April 25, that a shipment of elementary books for post school work was received—books purchased by the Y. M. C. A. and taken over by the Army, and this for only a part of their needs. The work of the A. L. A. in making this work possible at all up to this date has brought for our organization the lasting appreciation from every man in the Army who had anything to do with this educational work. Imagine the feelings of those responsible for this work when the advanced students appeared April 1, and the expected source of book supply failed. That we could meet this emergency in part at least is due to the energetic work of the Paris headquarters.

The part of my work that takes least time, but which in proportion to the time taken has more human interest in it than any other, is getting books and reading matter to the men on the freighters that rarely get back to the States—the men on the ships bringing potatoes from Ireland, coal from England and Wales, Belgian relief, German relief, Polish relief, submarine chasers, etc. Some of these ships have not been to the States for nineteen months, and the officers and crew alike are most hungry for something to read. Then too there are the slow going vessels

on which the men have read every book, or the ships that are held in port for repairs. They come to trade in what they have, and they usually turn in a lot of books that are not A. L. A.—books that some of them bought in some port or traded from another ship.

One evening when I came in from an afternoon out delivering books by motor truck I found a note saying that some boys had been to see me from a freighter that was going out on the tide that night, and that they wanted books. I walked a mile and a half through the mud to the dock where they were. The boys were delighted to see me. They wanted to trade in for a new lot the books they had all read. The only ones I had were just off a ship on a dock three-quarters of a mile away. Would they be willing to walk through the mud to get them? "Sure," came the response from eight or ten who jumped up to go at once. We took a ship's stretcher into which the books they had read were placed and four of the boys carried them while I led the way. One of the boys also had a screw driver. Most of them were California boys and their ship was California built. They brought on their first trip a cargo of eight or ten thousand tons of niter from Chile, had a brush with a German submarine that tried to get them, and were bubbling over with stories of their adventures. One of the boys was especially interested in the work of the A. L. A. His wife was a librarian, had taken a course in the library school at Riverside and worked in a county library in California, but was now taking care of their baby that he had never seen. And how anxious he was to get back to California to see that baby! Only the man who has children of his own could know how that boy felt. And I knew.

On the dock we soon had a box of fiction open, and by authors the boys delighted in. Clean, fresh, new books. The sight of those boys there in the dock warehouse, lighted by a few electric lamps high overhead, with busy stevedores and their noisy

trucks all around them, exclaiming and commenting on the books and authors, with books tucked under their arms and between their legs while they were examining still others held in their hands, was a picture long to be remembered. The old books were put into the box, the new ones placed in the stretcher and the boys started for the ship with their treasures.

The salvaging of books thus far has been mostly incidental but from now on it will be of increasing importance. In looking over the books salvaged from huts and barracks, I am impressed with the fact that a very large proportion of them are worn out and I am also impressed with the fact that among them are many books that the A. L. A. did not supply originally. These are books that the boys in the camp turned in to the hut library. They were either books they bought or books sent to them by their friends, and some of them are very valuable books. The same is true of books exchanged by the boys on the ships—many valuable books turned in that never belonged to the A. L. A. In all such books I place our label. Many "Y" secretaries had already done this, if not the label, a pocket and our book card. In some boxes of salvaged books from twenty to twenty-five per cent of the books have been turned in in this way. I am convinced if my experience in this respect is general that what the A. L. A. will gain through books turned into the libraries over here will more than offset the losses due to carelessness, neglect or appropriating. They will not of course offset the losses due to legitimate wear and tear.

The time is at hand to consider what to do with these salvaged books after the boys are out of France. I assume that a good many of them will go back to America, though a very large number of them are not worth sending back as books. If such can be sold as waste paper here it would save much work to dispose of them in that way. Of course we could doubtless send them back on troop ships towards the end of the troop movements for the use of the men on the voyage across and

then take off all but a few for the use of the officer and crew back to France. The Army and Navy of the United States in the course of a few years will absorb most of the books that are left. Judging from experience with salvaged books stored for only a short time in Y. M. C. A. or other warehouses I doubt the advisability of storing these books packed in boxes. A good many of them moulded and a number of the others were damaged by rats or mice eating the backs off them to get the paste.

Most of my friends in the States think I am over here on a big junket. Forget it. I never worked so hard or read so little in my life. But there are experiences unusual, pleasant, and memorable. Can I ever forget my first trip to Nantes and Angers? It was in January on a five ton motor truck with a driver who was the night man for a big truck concern in Chicago, his duty being to get broken-down trucks off the down town streets in the quickest possible time, so as not to block the traffic. We started from Nantes in a wet snow in the morning, passing the famous chateau and the cathedral that was old when Columbus discovered America. I shall never forget the thrill on coming unexpectedly on that beautiful tower of the Ninth century at Oudon, now one of the national art monuments of France, then the ruins at Champtoce and the thrill that came when I bought a post card at a near-by shop to find that it was the ruined castle of Bluebeard, and finally the third thrill in approaching and driving by the great and beautiful old Chateau at Angers with its intimate associations for a thousand years with the history of France and England. What though I was stiff and chilled to the bone, so that I could hardly climb down from the truck; it was a great and memorable day.

I could easily use hours in relating incidents and experiences that have come my way, some directly connected with the A. L. A. and its work and others only incidentally so. But time and your powers of endurance forbid. I should like to en-

large on an automobile trip to Trignac pumping station, where some forty men are quartered (isolated and surrounded by buvettes or worse, to quote an army officer), to furnish water to the camps at St. Nazaire and Montoir, operate the pumps, patrol the pipe lines; how we lost our way in the big marsh, driving for miles on narrow dyke roads, partly covered with water, and where it would have been impossible to have passed another vehicle; of how I was brought from Camp Gron to St. Nazaire on a railroad hand car by two soldier boys; of a walk out and back on the mile long trestle to the men isolated on Montoir dock, stepping ties much of the way and holding on to myself to keep from being blown into the river; of the interesting Breton people and their customs in the towns along the coast; of an annual fête we ran into at Muzillac; of the most fascinating steel spider bridge at La Roche Bernard; of a night ride into Vannes and our troubles to find our way through the narrow winding streets to our hotel; all these and a host of others must be passed by.

The automobile and truck drivers have interested me very much. I have had scores of them drive for me, and never once a poor army driver. The more I see of them the more I am impressed with what the camp psychologist told me at Camp Custer, where he was testing all the men to find out what each man was best fitted for. He said that for the qualities of a commanding officer which require quickness and sureness of decision, alertness, and the ability to size up a situation correctly, the truck and automobile drivers ranked higher than any other class of men. Lawyers stood second in the list.

I wish I had time to tell you of the many interesting people—splendid people—one meets in the most unexpected ways and places; of Captain Hickey of the Salvation Army (who will have been in

France over two years by the time of the A. L. A. Conference) and how he came over here alone—the first Salvation Army worker in France—to start their work “on \$25,000 borrowed money and nerve, mostly nerve,” to use his words; of the men with whom I work daily in the school office—the Base Section school officer, born in England, educated at the University of Aberdeen, at one time a resident of South Africa, associated with Dr. Jacks (in whose family he lived) in the editorship of the Hibbert Journal, a preacher in British Columbia and at Berkeley, California; of his assistant from West Virginia and of the University of Wisconsin; of the divisional school officer from Louisiana, graduate of the state university with postgraduate work at the University of Virginia and before entering the Army the representative of a great international publishing house in the southwest; of the other boys in that office, the typewriter boy from the University of Missouri College of Mines at Rolla—a second lieutenant; the University of Minnesota boy who spends most of his time helping me, cataloging books, packing books, pasting labels, hustling boxes, etc., and the sergeant who runs the routine of the office and who could probably buy out all the rest of us together—a diamond merchant of New York but a native of Denmark.

The work has been hard, desperately hard at times—but a joyous work, because one felt it so worth while. Most of the time it seemed as if one were playing a big football game with all the uncertainties, all the lightning-like changes in plans, and all the excitement of such a tense struggle. It was not library work of the institutional kind one left behind, but it has been doubly rich in personal satisfaction in the doing, for one has been in daily, vital contact with every phase of life—that greatest adventure of every human soul.